

Indians Rally to Restore Trinity River Flows

They target a coalition of power agencies and a huge water district.

By Jennifer K. Morita – Sacramento Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 a.m. PST Tuesday, March 16, 2004

They say that years ago, the Trinity River was so full of fish you could walk across the water on the backs of salmon.

A fisherman could spend three days on the river and catch enough food for an entire year.

Now, two American Indian tribes say the Northern California Power Agency and one of the nation's largest water districts are taking too much water out of the river, destroying the fish population and their way of life.

Roughly 60 Hoopa Valley and Yurok Indians, along with members of Friends of the River, demonstrated in front of NCPA offices in Roseville on Monday afternoon. They waved signs, beat a ceremonial drum and asked the agency to end a legal battle that they say has blocked restoration of the Trinity River for years.

"The river is our lifeline," said Tabitha Chenault, a 21-year-old member of the Yurok tribe. "But these last few years, the river and fish have started to die. All you have to do is walk by and see the dead fish floating down the river. It's an awful, awful sight."

The Trinity River, which flows from the Trinity Alps near Redding to the Pacific Ocean, was dammed 40 years ago by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Up to 90 percent of the river's flow was diverted to irrigate Central Valley farms and provide hydropower to cities such as Sacramento.

As a result, salmon and steelhead trout populations have declined over the years. In 2002, 33,000 fish died along the Lower Klamath River. Some scientists say that if water had been restored to the Klamath from the Trinity River, some of the fish may have been saved.

Kendall Allen, 16, who spent the day demonstrating in front of the NCPA offices, remembered the fish kill.

"It was so gross," Allen said. "It stunk and it was awful."

The U.S. Interior Department approved a plan to restore nearly half of the Trinity's historical flows, but a federal judge blocked the plan after Westlands Water District sued. Westlands, a 600,000-acre district in Fresno and Kings counties, later was joined by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District and the Northern California Power Agency, a coalition of public power agencies.

NCPA officials say the government focused too much on increasing the water flow and didn't consider other alternatives.

"Fundamentally, we feel we're on the same side," NCPA Legislative Director John Fistolera said. "We share the same goal of restoring the river and fisheries, but we have to do it in a way that is science-based and takes a responsible look at everyone's needs and objectives."

NCPA Assistant General Manager Jane Dunn Cirrincione said the only way to effectively restore the river is to continually evaluate flow levels and adjust the plan accordingly.

"The concern is if you lock into a single flow level, it doesn't give federal agencies the flexibility to evaluate the impact on the waterway and see if it helps further restoration goals, or set restoration goals back," Cirrincione said.

SMUD dropped out of the lawsuit last year, and Hoopa representatives have been appealing to individual NCPA members to follow suit.

So far, the cities of Palo Alto and Alameda have dropped out.

Remaining litigants include Westlands Water District and the cities of Roseville, Santa Clara and Redding.

Fistolera said the lawsuit has worked its course, and the Department of the Interior is conducting a new environmental study of its proposed plan that he expects will be released any day.

Hoopa Valley Tribal Chairman Clifford Lyle Marshall offered NCPA officials a basket of homemade kippered salmon and asked the agency to drop its lawsuit.

"We hope you will do the right thing," Marshall said, extending an invitation to visit the tribe. "Spend a few days rafting or try fishing. If you saw the river even once, you'll understand why we love it so much and understand why it's so important to protect it."

Hoopa Valley Tribal Councilman Joseph Jarnaghan said the Trinity River's average flow used to be 1.2 million acre-feet a year.

"Now it's 120,000 acre-feet; that's 10 percent of what it used to be," Jarnaghan said. "You can imagine what the Sacramento River would look like if it was only 10 percent of its flow. It's just devastating."

"To us, the river is a way of life. We live, work and play in that water. It's something we've always had, and something we plan to always have in the future."

Several younger members of the tribe also attended the demonstration, including Marshall's 18-year-old son Cliff Marshall Jr.

"You can see the decay of the river," the younger Marshall said. "There didn't used to be as much moss, and it used to be one of the clearest rivers around. We used to swim in the Klamath River when I was a kid, and now it's brown.

"This century will be one of the most desperate times for the Indian people because a lot is being lost. ... We're trying to hold on to what we can."